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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000730

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE PASS USAID/ANE
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BANGKOK FOR USAID/RDM
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: TRAVEL RESTRICTED FOR NGOS AND UN

REF: A. 04 RANGOON 1375 AND PREVIOUS

[1B.](#) RANGOON 658 AND PREVIOUS

[11.](#) (SBU) Summary: Since three bombs rocked Rangoon in early May, the GOB has made it clear to INGOs and UN agencies that free travel of expats is a thing of the past. Though there is nothing in writing, and the new policy is not being consistently applied, the Minister of Health briefed NGO workers that expat staff can no longer travel to Burma's seven ethnic states or its more politically sensitive divisions. There are several possible reasons for this abrupt shift in policy. Whatever the reality, the apparent inclusion of UN agencies in this travel ban, and the inability of INGO foreign staff to travel to many of their project sites, could have a significant impact on USG programs and our insight into the goings on in Burma's remoter regions. End summary.

No More NGO Expat Traveling

[12.](#) (SBU) According to numerous contacts from Rangoon-based international NGOs (INGOs), the GOB has since the May 7 triple bombing in Rangoon (ref A) made it difficult for INGO expats to travel to any of Burma's seven states as well as Sagaing and Tanintharyi Divisions. In most cases, INGO programs in these areas would be allowed to continue, though with only local Burmese staff. According to two health INGO representatives, the restrictions seem targeted in particular at those INGOs that have a MOU with the Ministry of Health (MOH). In early May the Minister of Health addressed all INGOs with Ministry MOUs and, sheepishly by all accounts, explained the new restrictions and apologized for what he promised would only be a "temporary" situation. There has not been any written policy or explanation.

[13.](#) (SBU) The travel ban does not appear completely limited to MOH-affiliated groups, however. A source from a food assistance NGO operating in Wa territory in Shan State told us that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) had recently denied requests for expat travel in the region. UNODC reported that its GOB counterpart had also turned down one of UNODC's recent requests to travel in the Wa region.

UNHCR: Go Back from Whence You Came

[14.](#) (SBU) As we will report in more detail septel, UNHCR told us that the Ministry of Home Affairs has made it clear that the agency's recently granted access to the Thai border areas (ref B) is in jeopardy. Though UNHCR has no formal MOU with the MOHA, the two have an "exchange of letters" allowing work in sensitive regions. According to the UNHCR acting country coordinator, the MOHA told UNHCR in mid-May that it could no longer travel to Karen, Karen, and Mon States and Tanintharyi Division. Though the Ministry subsequently relented on an already-planned trip, future trips are in doubt, the coordinator told us. Interestingly, UNHCR told us that its long-standing activities in northern Rakhine State have not been challenged. One health NGO working in Rakhine State echoed this, saying the NGO's activities there and the ability to travel there freely, with GOB permission, have not changed.

Comment: Why Now?

[15.](#) (SBU) The GOB gave no reasons for the new travel restrictions, which thus far have not been formally extended to diplomats or tourists. However, we see at least two possibilities. The first is fear, post May 7 bombings, that expats in the remote countryside would be beyond reliable GOB supervision and thus potential targets for attack -- or potential collaborators with "external destructionists" planning their next move. Another possibility is concern at the top of the SPDC ladder of increased activity by foreigners in the countryside. INGOs have been very pleased with the current Health Minister's constructive and permissive attitude toward their work in previous off-limits areas. It could be the Defense Ministry has taken a sudden disliking to this cozy relationship with foreigners and is reasserting its always supreme authority over all

travel-related rules. In any event, these new restrictions (if they stick) could have a major impact on INGOs' and UN agencies' ability to do their work properly, especially monitoring and assessment, and thus on current USAID and proposed Global Fund programs outside of Rangoon and Mandalay. End comment.

McMullen